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TAGS: PREL PGOV EAIR ECON IR IZ

SUBJECT: NAJAF TOURISM COMMITTEE PLANS JANUARY CONFERENCE

REF: HILLAH 125

CLASSIFIED BY: Angus Simmons, Team Leader, PRT Najaf, DOS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) On October 23, PRTOffs met with the Najaf Provincial Council (PC) Tourism Conference preparatory committee. The Committee is a sophisticated group under the leader of PC and hawza member Sheik Fayid Kudhum al Shmerti. The Committee members noted that the tourism industry of Najaf is made up of religious tourism, ruin/archeological tourism, and recreational tourism. The Committee wants to use the tourism conference to discuss serious tourism issues, but also sees the conference as an opportunity to showcase Najaf as a tourism destination to Iraq and the world.

Iranian Pilgrims

¶12. (C) In the course of discussing PRT support for the tourism conference, PRT Team Leader noted that the USG understood that Najaf tourism would naturally include religious pilgrims from Iran attending Shi'a holy festivals. PRT Team Leader added to Sheik Fayid that the PRT would not have any issue with Iraqis in the travel business who facilitate such tourism participating in the conference. PRT leader stressed that such activity was normal and that the U.S. had no problem with the Iranian people. However, PRT Team Leader noted U.S. issues with the Iranian government, and that it would be awkward to use USG funding for a conference if Iranian officials were invited. PRT Team Leader added that he wanted to raise this matter now to avoid embarrassment at the last minute.

Iraqi Shi'as are Iraqis First

¶13. (S) Sheik Fayid responded immediately that he understood and that no Iranian officials would be invited to take part. Smiling, he said he was a "simple member of the Najaf hawza", and that the committee did not want politics to interfere with the goals of the conference. Although he and PC member Mohammed Al Marzouk could have stopped there, they continued. They noted that Sh'ia Iraqis were Iraqis first. They insisted that the South Central Iraq had been and always would be Iraqi and would never fall under Iranian domination. They urged the U.S. to understand that. Moreover, they noted that Vice President Hashemi had recently (about three weeks ago) visited Najaf, meeting with many people and asking a wide range of questions, and left Najaf completely satisfied about Najaf's plans for the future.

Comment

¶14. (C) The Najafis are proposing a three-day tourism conference in early January to start the outreach and set the tone for their coming economic agenda. The Najafis will invite the Prime Minister and other senior government officials to attend. It

will be held at Kufa University and PRT and 3ID personnel are invited to attend all three days. The Najafis are continuing to work on their airport which will be a key fillip to the industry. They want -- and PRT Najaf intends to support the Najafis within the scope of our resources and those we can mobilize -- to build on their current 2500 daily international visitors while developing the tourism industry as a key pillar of Najaf's economy. We would like the conference to anchor other tangible activities such as the establishment of a tourism center and travel/tourism vocational training and education. This is a well-conceived, integrated approach that has the potential to make a huge difference in employment, optimism, and security/stability, and we would like to do what we can to help the Najaf provincial government implement it.

SIMMONS